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Visions

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Visions

Visions were an accepted and vital form of religious encounter in the ancient world, as evidenced in documentary texts, such as the inscriptions found at the Asklepeia (healing temples dedicated to the god ASKLEPIOS). In these inscriptions a supplicant to Asklepios would describe the DREAM the person had at the Asklepeion, as well as the miraculous results of this visionary encounter with the god. Visionary encounters also have a place of pride in ancient prose and in poetry, enabling hearers of the text to access the visionary experience through the descriptive details of the text. In some cases, as in PLATO's myth of Er, a vision represents a narrative break in the text. In the HEBREW BIBLE and in the NEW TESTAMENT, many of the visions are granted to leaders or prophets, like MOSES, SAMUEL and PETER. As in the JOSEPH cycle of the book of GENESIS, some visions are part of dream sequences, and require interpretation. In other instances, as in Jewish and Christian APOCALYPTIC texts, the entire work is an account of the vision.

Visions can also offer the reader access to otherworldly beings or places, and thus mediate a connection between two or more disparate planes of existence. In the book of DANIEL, for instance, the dreams and visions described in the text offer a connection between the present day and a future reality that is conveyed through vivid and highly symbolic imagery. In other apocalyptic texts, like the books of ENOCH, the REVELATION OF JOHN, and the Apocalypse of Paul, the visions reveal otherworldly places that are somehow related to life in the earthly sphere of existence. Visions use detailed descriptions and visual rhetoric in order to help the reader imagine these distinctive scenes. The Greek grammatical exercises (found in the *Progymnasmata*) in visual rhetoric (*ekphrasis*) offer a key to understanding the popularity, influence, and rhetorical function of visionary accounts in all genres of ancient Mediterranean literature.

Suggested Reading

Cox Miller, P. *Dreams in Late Antiquity: Studies in the Imagination of a Culture*. Princeton, 1994.

Yarbro Collins, A. "The Apocalyptic Ekphrasis." In *1900th Anniversary of Saint John's Apocalypse: Proceedings of the International and Interdisciplinary Symposium*, 449–464. Holy Monastery of Saint John the Theologian in Patmos, 1999.